

## Surgical Company Saves Lives

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AL ASAD, Iraq - During the midst of wartime, most people are more concerned with the chaos of the bombs and guns in the conflicts that rage rather than with the scalpel or suture that reassemble what the former tears apart.

For the sailors and Marines with Charlie Surgical Company at Al Asad, Iraq, the latter is their only concern, as it is their job to resuscitate the men and women who have met with ill fortune on the battlefield.

"Our main mission here at Al Asad Surgical is to provide level-two care for all patients who are brought to us," said Navy Cmdr. Richard P. Sharpe, Chief of Professional Services, officer-in-charge, Charlie Surgical Company, Combat Logistics Regiment 15, 1st Marine Logistics Group (Forward). "Level-two care involves any seriously injured or ill patient and their surgical management, stabilization and (medical evacuation)."

"Our routine job is to save people's lives," the 42-year-old native of Chesapeake, Va., added. "Every week we have several people who, if it wasn't for our efforts of stabilizing and operating on them, would probably have died without our level of care."

The present group of sailors and Marines with the company arrived in early August and has since been loaded down with the cold, hard truth of their job.

"About two or three times per week, we will have numerous very sick or injured patients arrive at once," said Sharpe, a graduate of Cedarville University. "Since it occurs so frequently, it's actually a routine for us now, but it still presents a situation that is very hectic. It necessitates that everyone not only remains organized, but stays focused and does their job, as well.

"It's always, in those instances, a team effort that makes it a success," added Sharpe, who is also a graduate of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, School of Medicine in Bethesda, Md. "There can never be just one nurse, one corpsman or one physician doing their job. It has to be the entire team doing their job right the first time in order to save someone's life."

Although the entire hospital is pushed into overdrive when just one patient arrives at its backdoor, there are the extreme occasions where the men and women working behind the curtains are held in the rush of adrenaline for hours on end.

"We had 24 patients show up in one hour (in early October)," said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Gerard J. Woelkers, executive officer, Charlie Surgical Company. "We were able to take care of them, but not only that, we were also able to effectively utilize more than 160 military professionals, 80 of which belonged to this company and 80 who came from all around Al Asad.

"The folks here are as good as I've seen," added the Detroit native. "I've been in Navy medicine for 23 years and am really proud to be leading these troops here. I've never seen it better. This group not only works well together, but they play well together, too. They put personal agendas aside and save lives."

As a team, the sailors and Marines of Charlie Surgical Company are considered one of the best, according to Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Chris D. Henderson, corpsman, Shock Trauma Platoon, Charlie Surgical Company.

"We are the tip of the spear for the Navy," said Henderson, a 25-year-old native of Springfield, Mo. "We are the best at what we do. Everyone came from different places and different units, and we all gelled together. We've had to deal with a lot of things, like the power going out (while treating patients), but we work through them as best we can. I think it's the people that make this hospital run as well as it does."

For some, the fact that they are in Iraq using the profession they've trained for, while saving lives, is an honor.

"It's great knowing that what you have been training for and went to school for is useful," said Navy Lt. Alecia M. Gende, enroute care nurse, Charlie Surgical Company. "It's nice to know that you can contribute to the war effort. It's a privilege to be here and to be able to see the things we do. It's a privilege to work with the Iraqi civilians that maybe would not have gotten the quality of care had we not been here. That helps to give them a better impression of Americans."

Since the hospital treats everyone from U.S. service members to Iraqi Army and police to local nationals for care, friendships are formed between the medical personnel and some of their patients.

"We had a couple (local nationals) here for at least a week and a half," said Gende, a 29-year-old native of Princeton, Wis. "They knew our names, and we knew theirs. You form a relationship. You know that they will know you forever and that you will know them forever, because there was that bond formed between the two cultures."

Although the sailors and Marines with Charlie Surgical Company save several people's lives other than just the U.S. service members, there is a downside to their job.

"The most difficult aspect, for me, would be pronouncing a U.S. service member's death," said Sharpe. "The toughest part of my job is to realize when any more care for the patient is futile."

Through the despair when those fateful days occur, the sailors and Marines manage to keep their spirits high enough to continue their jobs and save the next person who arrives in need of their care.

"We have a high morale here because we focus on our successes," said Sharpe. "There is nothing more rewarding than saving a Marine who is literally dying after operating on him and fixing him. There's no bigger boost to morale than saving someone's life. It carries us well through those times where we can't."

As the fight in Iraq continues, sailors and Marines continue to save lives. The unit -- originally designed to be mobile and work out of tents wherever the Marines go -- works out of a fixed structure and receives numerous casualties per week via helicopter transport straight to the hospital.

The surgeons, nurses, dentists, corpsmen and Marines are all part of an elite team who witness and fix things and people that only a handful of others ever get to experience.

"If you think about it, we essentially make the war fighter invincible," said Gende, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. "We can take a person who was injured and heal them here and send them off. Maybe they go back to the United States or maybe they come back out here. There is great pride in that."